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ABSTRACT

As the entering-college population dwindles and competition to attract this population increases among colleges, student retention has become a primary concern for community colleges. Assessing the extent of the dropout problem is particularly problematic for community colleges, as they are institutions geared to the facilitation of ease of entrance, exit, and reentry. In an attempt to clarify the community college attrition phenomenon, one 1982 study identified three categories of attrition: "positive attrition," which refers to students who have met their objectives or transferred; "neutral attrition," which refers to students who leave due to a job or other scheduling conflict; and "negative attrition," which refers to students unprepared or unmotivated for their studies. Because of the complex nature of drop-in and dropout patterns, each college needs to determine the extent of its own attrition problem. Retention studies can take a variety of approaches. For example, Spoon River College (Illinois) conducted a study focusing on the differing needs of full- and part-time students, and demonstrated the effectiveness of specifically designed retention plans for these different student populations. Valencia Community College (Florida) conducted a study concentrating on the factors affecting the retention of a single minority group, black students. Middlesex County College (New Jersey) drew from the insights of a number of special populations within the student body to assess the interaction between institutional provisions and student needs, while the City Colleges of Chicago examined institutional variables and their effects on student course completion. (UCM)

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Assessing the Student Attrition Problem

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Student retention is a priority concern. Though community college practitioners and administrators have always committed themselves to student success, student retention is now a matter of economic survival. The dwindling cohort of traditionally-aged college students has triggered a keen competition among colleges for enrollments; there is no longer a steady stream of entering students to take the place of those who drop out, and dropouts simply represent lost students and lost revenue. "As colleges scramble for students, then, it becomes increasingly important to characterize ... the potential dropout; to determine the reasons why he or she might withdraw, and to see if procedures or programs could be established to help reduce those numbers that are going back out the open door" (Rounds, 1984, p. 1).

What is the Extent of the Dropout Problem at Community Colleges?

Rounds (1984) notes that "it has been very difficult to get clear retention data from many colleges, because they have not had it" (p. 1). Drawing upon the literature, she attributes this problem in part to a reluctance of some administrators and faculty to address the dropout phenomenon. Whatever the reason, data on the percent of entering students who dropout before completing a degree or program are hard to come by.

However, such data means little in institutions that facilitate ease of entrance, exit and reentry. Many students take advantage of open admissions policies to fulfill short-term educational goals that do not include a degree or certificate. As Cohen and Brawer (1982) point out,

> Programs and sequential curricula for the good of the students, who will learn more if they maintain continuous enrollment in a curriculum designed to lead them to sophisticated knowledge of a subject. However, students use community colleges for their purposes and frequently achieve those purposes short of program completion (p. 57).

Thus, it is hard to pinpoint the proportion of attrition that represents student failure.

In an attempt to clarify the community college attrition phenomenon, Sheldon (1982) identified three categories of attrition in a three-year longitudinal analysis of approximately 6,500 students who entered California community colleges in Fall 1978. The first category, "positive attrition," included students who dropped out after meeting their objectives or who transferred to another institution. This "positive attrition" accounted for approximately 21 percent of the vocational students in the study who left the community college, and for approximately 14 percent of the non-vocational leavers. The second category, "neutral attrition," included students who left because of a job conflict or because of a scheduling conflict with another school. These reasons, which imply neither success nor failure, accounted for approximately 34 percent of the

attrition among the vocational students and for approximately 40 percent of the attrition among non-vocational students. The third category, "negative attrition" included those students who were unprepared for classwork to begin with or who were not sufficiently motivated to complete their course of studies. "Negative attrition" accounted for approximately 16 percent of the attrition among vocational students and for approximately 19 percent of the attrition among non-vocational students. Sheldon maintains that only the "negative attrition" is under the control of the college.

In short, simple dropout rates do not explain the extent or the seriousness of attrition at the community college.

College Efforts to Assess the Attrition Problem

Because of the complex nature of drop-in and drop-out patterns, each college needs to determine the extent of its own attrition problem and to determine how the college can be more helpful to students as they pursue their educational goals. Four such community college retention studies are described below. One focuses on the differing needs of part-time and full-time students; one concentrates on factors that affect the retention of a single minority group; one draws from the insights of a number of special populations within the student body; and one examines different institutional factors that affect retention. Each represents an effort to better understand campus retention problems.

Spoon River College In order to examine attrition patterns and to develop appropriate retention plans, a retention committee at Spoon River College (IL) conducted a follow-up study of graduates and carried out two longitudinal studies of the first-time students who enrolled in Fall 1980 and in Fall 1981. The college then developed retention action plans for five segments of the student population: full-time day transfer students; full-time day occupational students; part-time day students who are enrolled in a specific program; and students who are taking courses but who are not enrolled in a program. Study data indicated that the college does not have a major retention problem with traditional, full-time students, though differences in retention rates, especially in occupational degree areas, are considerable. Furthermore, the findings revealed that the retention of full-time students could best be strengthened through an early warning system, improved academic advisement, enhanced communication between faculty and students, and other measures designed to increase student involvement with the institution. Retention among non-traditional, part-time students, however, could be best improved through advisement and counseling that is designed to reduce the fear of returning to school and to help students overcome other psychological barriers to academic success. Spoon River College, in short, used its institutional research to tailor specially designed retention

plans for different student populations. Gardner (1983) provides further information on the college's retention efforts.

Valencia Community College The Black student retention project at Valencia College (FL) was established on the advice of the College's Black advisory committee in 1980-81 to identify the factors that positively effect academic success among Black students. Campus visibility for the project was assured through the creation of a ten-member advisory board made up of the project director, an educational advisor, college administrators, faculty, staff, students, and members of the Black advisory committee. Project activities included (1) an analysis of the grades earned by the 211 Black students who withdrew from the college between the first and second sessions of 1980-81; (2) a survey of those students to determine the reasons they had for withdrawing; (3) a survey of all Black students enrolled during the second session of 1980-81; and (4) the provision of workshops on financial aid, assertiveness training, communications skills, Black history, career opportunities, and other topics for Black students. These activities revealed that attrition was largely the result of insufficient academic and support services; indeed, 75 percent of the grades earned by Black students who withdrew between the first and second sessions of 1980-81 were D's, F's, I's, or W's. Project members recommended that the college continue to monitor Black student enrollment, graduation, nd withdrawal; that faculty become more involved in the early referral of academically unprepared students to appropriate academic support services; and that a more comprehensive tutorial and academic support program be developed and offered to all students. Through these efforts, the college hopes to develop a foundation on which to establish a comprehensive support services program for high-risk students. See Staff and Program Development ..., (1981) for further information.

Middlesex County College Defining attrition as an outcome of the interaction between institutional provisions and student needs, a student retention committee at Middlesex County College (NJ) held a series of focused group discussions with several college constituencies; Blacks, Hispanics, veterans, traditional college students, nontraditional students, former students, faculty, and administrators. Through these discussions, the committee sought to identify factors that aggravate student-college interaction and thus increase attrition. Among the conclusions drawn from the interviews were the determinations that students need to know that the college cares about their academic experiences, that increase interaction between students and faculty plays an important role in retention, and that better communication is needed between all offices and students. Through these interviews, then, Middlesex County College secured the participation of a wide spectrum of students in a college-wide retention effort that already included a staff development program, a quantitative semester-by-semester attrition report, and a basic skills competency study.

City Colleges of Chicago Rather than studying the relationship between individual or group variables and academic persistence, the City Colleges of Chicago examined the effects of four institutional variables -- the college, the department, the teacher, and the course -- on students' course completion. Three colleges were chosen as representative of the eight City Colleges, and the English, business, and mathematics departments were chosen from the departments with the largest enrollment. From within each of these three departments at the three campuses, ten teachers, each teaching one introductory course and one higher level-course in Spring 1981, were randomly selected. Statistical analyses revealed significant variations in completion rates between teachers and between colleges, with these two factors accounting for about 75 percent of the total variation. There was also significant variation between departments across colleges and considerably greater variation between colleges than between departments within a college. The study also revealed an insignificant level of variation between upper and lower-level courses. Since teacher effect accounts for the largest amount of variation in earned credit rates, it was recommended that staff development be considered as a method for improving student achievement and retention rates. This study, then, addresses the need to pinpoint institutional factors that affect retention. Easton and Guskey (1982) describe the study in detail.

Sources of Further Information on Community College Student Retention

The studies cited above are only a sample of the journal articles and ERIC documents that deal with student attrition and retention at the community college. Additional citations can be found through manual or computer searches of the ERIC database. Consult your librarian or contact the ERIC Clearinghouse for Junior Colleges; 8118 Math Sciences Building; UCLA; Los Angeles, California 90024.

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